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# **The dialogic turn and management fashions**

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This paper examines Dialogue as a managerial fashion that has emerged since the early 1990s. While the early parts of the paper rely on well-tried approaches to and arguments about the phenomenon, the middle part of the paper attempts to define dialogue as a fashion, and offers a discussion of the dynamics of fashion-setting. Finally, we attempt to extend the theoretical framework by paying particular attention to the synchronic and diachronic dimension of a management fashion.

### **Management fashions**

The study of management fashions has developed steadily over the last two decades and despite occasional expression of doubt over theory development in this area (Clark 2004), the concept has worked to enrich the knowledge of management and to provide interesting questions about management knowledge and managerial practice. The idea was put into circulation by Abrahamson in 1991, but it is his later article (1996) that articulated the influential definition of the concept as well as set the broad parameters for research on the topic. We will take Abrahamson's definition as the starting point for our discussion:

A management fashion ...is a relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management fashion setters, that a management technique leads rational management progress (Abrahamson 1996, p.257)

This explanation draws on theories of the diffusion of innovations (Rogers 1962) and fashions (Hirsh 1972) thus introducing a number of key concepts and features into the discussion that ensued. The key lines of the debate and research can be summarised as: the transitory nature of a management fashion; the nature of management fashions' content; actors involved in the creation and dissemination of fashions; and the role of rhetorical activity in the process.

The early research on fashions was sparked off by the fascination with the often spectacular rise to popularity of certain management ideas, followed equally swiftly by their subsequent disappearance from view after a period of time. This phenomenon was described as a bell-shaped life cycle of a fashion (Abrahamson 1996, p.257; Spell 1999; Carson et al 2000). More recently, however, questions have been asked about the validity of such a description based on the critique of the methodology behind it— bibliometric analysis (Clark, 2004, p.298; Benders and van Veen 2001). On the basis of frequency of mentions in academic journals and popular

managerial periodicals, life cycles have been constructed of labels associated with specific fashions and the findings represented as more or less bell-shaped curves. The problem with this approach is the assumption it makes about the link between the popular discourse about an idea and its adoption in practice, which is rather like trying 'to determine what the average person is wearing' on the basis of 'advertisements in fashion magazines, such as *Vogue* or *Harpers' and Queen*', as Clark puts it (2004, p.299). A related criticism here is the extent to which the bell curve of a fashion's life cycle produced from such a media content analysis, while it may reflect adequately the four stages of fashion-setting – creation, selection, processing and dissemination (as defined by Abrahamson 1996) – is less likely to tell us very much about the social impact of the final stage, dissemination (Clark 2004, p.300; Benders and van Veen 2001, p.43).

The idea of the transitory nature of fashions has also been scrutinised by a number of authors interested in the question of the longevity of management ideas, or to put it differently, in continuity within management knowledge. Approaches taken to investigate this problem can be seen to focus on the institutionalization of fashions (Perkman and Spicer, 2008) or its opposite, to echo the title of Røvik's influential book chapter, deinstitutionalization, as the logic of management fashion. Røvik's (1996) notion of 'sediments' left by fashions, which may influence future organizational change (Benders and van Veen 2001, p.48), is a useful starting point. The key here is the decoupling of labels (concepts) and practices they refer to. In fact, this has come to be seen as an important characteristic of a management fashion's rhetoric — its 'pragmatic ambiguity' (Giroux, 2006) or 'interpretative viability', i.e. a degree of flexibility allowing different reinterpretations of core ideas into locally constructed sets of practices (for a discussion see Benders and van Veen, 2001; Nijholt and Benders, 2007, p.630).

Perkman and Spicer (2008) take a different approach: they start by building on the evidence of durability of fashions, such as TQM, to explain how certain fashions become institutions; in other words, how they can acquire a degree of permanence but also, we could add, of relative invisibility. Their explanation is based on identifying three types of institutional work (political, cultural and technical), the role played by different actors in conducting institutional work, and the cumulative nature of such efforts. What has gradually come to the foreground of our attention thus is the underexplored relationship between management knowledge understood as a more permanent set of theories and concepts (institutionalised through

management textbooks, education and much of the managerial practice); and management fashions, defined as 'patterns of production and consumption of temporarily intensive management discourse, and the organizational changes introduced and associated with this discourse' (Benders and van Veen, 2001, pp.48-49).

The preceding paragraph has already offered some explanations of how and why fashions 'disappear', but let us deal with this question more extensively. Abrahamson (1996) proposed explanations such as: changes in the norms of rationality; dynamics within the market for management fashions (including supply of ideas, but also boredom with existing ideas or their diminishing market value due to overuse); a wider shift in labour market conditions; and changes in technology. Carson et al (2000) in an extensive study covering five decades and 16 fashions advance a number of hypotheses related to: technical aspects of the fashion (broadness of the ideas in terms of how widely they need to be applied in an organization; difficulty of implementation, degree to which upper management are responsible for the implementation); the nature of the ideas contained in the fashion (people-oriented vs. production-oriented); and factors external to the ideas and practices themselves, such as complexity of the environment, intensity of competitive pressures (reflected in length of the life cycle); and the general economic conditions seen in terms of trade balance, labour costs, levels of corporate profits, merger and acquisition activity. As can be seen, the explanations cluster into three dimensions: technique (managerial ideas and their translation into tools); market (for specific managerial fashions); and economic conditions.

As old fashions fade away, new ones take shape. Some of the explanations about the former phenomenon presented above apply also to the latter. For example, Abrahamson's changing norms of rationality by which managers and others judge fashions may be one such explanation. The perceived inefficacy of older fashions may also serve as an impetus for the appearance of new ones, demonstrated in Carson et al's study as shortening life cycles of fashions in the period covered by their study. Interestingly for the argument this paper aims to advance, the study found it hard to link 'fashion archetypes and economic variables' (p.1154). One of the possible explanations suggested is that different external variables may need to be considered, for example demographic statistics on education might provide explanations 'for evolving management fashions like "learning organizations" and "emotional intelligence"' (p.1154).

The extent to which management fashions represent innovation has been a moot point from early on. Abrahamson interprets 'innovation' quite flexibly as 'either inventing management techniques that only appear to be improvements or rediscovering/ reinventing old management techniques' (1996, p.266). There is also a clear stream of fairly critical literature, particularly that which focuses on management gurus as fashion setters and sees fashions as 'old wine in new bottles', i.e. inauthentic innovations. The discussion about the provenance of management fashions is equally unsettled: while many accept, if not promote, the view that innovation comes from managerial practice (Abrahamson 1996, Galbraith 1980); some maintain that this happens the other way around. From this perspective, theory and scholarly work are seen to come first, and then serve as a basis for 'experts' to diagnose organizational problems that must be met by specific programmatic change. The customised replication of such change packages by other organizations would then set an expansion course that would nurture the legitimization of such programmes in the eyes of organizational decision-makers persuaded by the – real or perceived – need for change (Mills et al. 2009, p.35). The more recent studies of fashions see these efforts as the repackaging of ideas (Fincham and Roslender, 2003; Ten Bos and Heusinkveld, 2007). Consequently, novelty and creativity here need to be reinterpreted as bricolage: picking up shards of ideas and techniques, fitting them together and infusing them with local meaning.

The purpose of this paper is thus twofold: we aim to contribute to the understanding of management fashions by offering a discussion of dialogue as a management fashion (from now on, Dialogue) in its own right, but also to reflect on some of the theoretical themes identified in our discussion of the literature. We explore the question of the longevity of some management ideas as evidenced through their reworking across a number of fashions. This leads us to argue that fashions are anchored in more permanent sets of philosophies or worldviews that underpin sets of research interests, directions of practice, specific theories and concepts. Thus, the rising interest in participation, understood as a discursive (dialogical) practice, represents a swell in importance of one such paradigm, and this we argue, can be meaningfully connected to ideas and practices which have come to the fore on the political stage.

### **Approach to research**

As noted above, the bulk of management fashion studies have focussed on the supply-side of the fashion-setting process. Despite important critics (Newell et al. 2001; Clark 2004; Wright and Kwon 2006), this approach remains useful to detect significant patterns of production and diffusion that contribute to an understanding of the dynamics of the fashion-setting process. This is especially relevant for the study of the early formation stages. Dialogue, as we will argue, is currently still in the run-up to the peak of its bell shape. Although research on the consumption of Dialogue in organizational settings (adoption, adaptation, and implementation) is still to be developed, the aim of this paper is to begin to investigate Dialogue as a fashion by focusing on the production/diffusion stages and by reflecting on the links between this and other sets of ideas in the wider socio-political context.

Like Finchman and Roslender (2003, p.788), we take the view that a non-deterministic account of both production and diffusion patterns can be instructive, helping to understand how a management fashion gains its rhetorical strength by embodying a 'system of persuasion' (Alvesson, 1993; cited in Finchman and Roslender, 2003, p.787). Accordingly, our empirical approach combines a bibliometric study with a textual analysis. The study aims to answer three questions: Can Dialogue as a communication technique be treated as a management fashion? What are the key features of Dialogue, or to put it differently, what does the label refer to? Finally, how has Dialogue as a fashion been diffused?

### **Defining Dialogue**

Our starting point for the analysis was to accept the key role of publications, and especially management bestsellers, in the production and diffusion of fashions. We have identified a number of such key publications:

- Isaac's best seller *Dialogue and the art of thinking together. A pioneering approach to communicating in business and in life* (1999)
- Ellinor and Gerard's *Dialogue: rediscover the transforming power of conversation* (1998)
- Dixon's *Dialogue at work* (1998)
- Yankelovich's *The magic of Dialogue. Transforming conflict into cooperation* (1999)

Our key author and text here is Isaacs, who put Dialogue on the managerial radar in his influential 1992 essay; *Dialogue and the art of thinking together* was, however, significant in a different way, as a more popular in style and more publicly, widely visible statement. To contextualise this work, we identified other, similar books (listed above). We took the fact that similar publications appeared almost simultaneously to Isaacs' to indicate that the topic was indeed attracting attention and the ideas were circulating in management, even though we could not describe or quantify that process on the basis of the books' existence alone. To sum up, the four books share certain characteristics important to this study. Firstly, they were published almost simultaneously and they explicitly acknowledge the influence of David Bohm's work (we shall come back to this point later in the discussion). Secondly, the authors claim to be talking from their own experiences as theorist-practitioners within diverse organizations. This we take to offer some evidence of practical managerial relevance of the ideas and practices displayed in these books. Finally, they all explicitly state that their intention is to bring the potential of Dialogue to the business arena.

For the purposes of the bibliometric analysis, we operationalized Dialogue as a management fashion as the use of the term *dialogue* accompanied by a reference to a publication authored by Isaacs (we looked for a reference to one of the 15 journal articles published since 1992, or the 1999 book. See references for the full list). Furthermore, we conducted our analysis in a non-mechanical fashion, to paraphrase Clark (2004, p.299) – that is, we read all the articles and also introduced coding categories that allowed us to distinguish between dialogue as the central or peripheral idea in the article in order to be able to produce a more nuanced picture of diffusion.

### **Is Dialogue a management fashion?**

The key role of rhetoric in the construction and enactment of managerial expertise has been discussed for some time (Alvesson 1993; Clark and Salaman 1996; Abrahamson 1996; Kieser 1997). The use of the term rhetoric here alludes to the combination of arguments and aesthetics as part of a system of persuasion that functions as 'symbolic means of establishing the appeal of ideas to particular audiences' (Finchman and Roslender 2003, p.787) by leveraging compliance on the basis of simplified dichotomies such as threat/reward (p.788). Thus, as Newell et al. (2001) claim, management fashions are 'examples of powerful rhetorics that



shape management understandings and practices’ (p.5). Benders and Van Veen (2001) offer an analytical scheme of argument types typically present in books that try to render a concept fashionable for managerial audiences. These arguments fall into seven categories: 1. ‘threat of bankruptcy in case of non-adoption’, which we rename as problem diagnosis and threats; 2. ‘promises of performance enhancement’; 3. ‘using well-known and successful users of the concept’; 4. ‘stressing the concept’s universal applicability’; 5. ‘presenting the concept as an easily understandable commodity with a catchy title’; 6. ‘presenting the concept as timely, innovative and future-orientated’; and 7. ‘interpretive viability’ (p.35-36).

The rest of this section is devoted to the discussion of the four key books on dialogue identified earlier in this paper in order to test whether they present arguments that fit the analytical scheme and can, therefore, be taken to represent a fashion-setting effort. Our aim is not to produce an exhaustive analysis of the entire contents of the four books but rather to offer a shorter demonstration of how these authors resort to the use of the common themes of popular fashion-setting literature. As the authors use similar arguments, we shall avoid unnecessary duplication and focus on their shared elements rather than on the differing nuances of their approaches.

### 1. Problem diagnosis and threats: Dialogue or disaster

The impulse towards dialogue may well be an impulse towards survival for our organizations and our communities, both local and global. (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998, p. 59)

Isaacs identifies fragmentation—the ‘inability to think together’ (p.5)—as the biggest threat facing organizations, and acknowledges that the problem is not specialization, but ‘forgetting the connection’ (p.34). The failure of some companies that prioritise ‘hard’ organizational skills over ‘soft’ ones (cf. Pascale, 1990, pp.40, 42-43) is reiterated through many real case examples. For instance, this diagnostic of the situation in a particular factory:

No amount of market analysis, technical engineering calculations, financial projections, or hand wringing could have dealt with this situation. Failing to talk together effectively, these people sowed the seeds of their own disaster. (Isaacs 1999, p.35)

Ellinor and Gerard (1998) postulate, in no less dramatic terms, a crisis of meaning that heralds 'the end of an era' (p.5). Organizations are 'lost and rotting', we are 'stuck', 'hitting the wall', and on the verge of individual and collective 'exhaustion and approaching collapse'. The focus on profitability at the expense of relationships makes us (managers) 'hold on to our need for control and our beliefs that we can solve problems by rational analysis alone' (p.6). Eventually, this worldview 'take[s] us away from what we want most from organizational life: high productivity, satisfying relationships, meaningful work' (p.5). In this context, Dixon (1998) talks about organizations' need for developmental talk in order to face the challenges posed by an ever-increasing complexity of the business environment (p.11). As she puts it, 75 per cent of managers' time consists in talking and yet 'something is wrong with the way people talk to each other at work', 'organizational talk often has a game-like quality' that makes communication 'artificial, false, ...unsatisfying' (p.7) thus 'stifling' development in organizations (p.13).

For Yankelovich (1999, p.13) business is confronted with many threats arising from the lack of dialogue such as: misunderstanding, mistrust, damage to morale, resentfulness, apathy (see Table 1 in Appendix). The challenge starts at societal level; the metaphor here is a 'growing understanding gap' and its 'threat to our social cohesiveness' (Yankelovich, 1999, p.30). His diagnosis resorts to a grand narrative to offer hope: 'I detect no rottenness at the core, no deep decay of the sort that destroyed the great civilizations of the past [...] our world is not out of control'. The threat he detects 'as a social scientist' is a 'manageable problem, not a fatal disease' (Ibid).

## 2. Promise of solutions and performance enhancement: The billion-dollar dialogue

The books share notions of how dialogue can contribute to enhance organizational performance by fostering group creativity, building trust and consensus, creating shared vision, managing conflict, creating relational leadership, enabling problem-solving, and improving development and interpersonal skills. But there is more to it.

Isaacs (1999) is quite clear that dialogue has a positive impact on both the human factor of organizations and the bottom line of business. Indeed, as he states, 'one of the central focuses' (p.8) of his book is to explain this transformative process works:

Over a period of two years our MIT research team worked with these steelworkers and [...] senior managers [...]– two groups with a history of deep, bitter labor disputes [...]– to find a way of conversing that would transform some of their deepest differences into a meaningful, useful dialogue. After some months, many of them experienced a radical change, one that – for a time at least – turned their swords into plowshares. We delved into the deep assumptions carried by both groups and as a result forged great mutual respect, coordination, and connection. Moreover, this mutual understanding was extended to action in the form of improved performance, fewer grievances, and, for the first time in generations, mutual action to solve chronic problems in the mill. The changed atmosphere helped to convince outside financial groups to invest over \$100 million in the business. (pp.8-9)

In a different setting, a company's pensions committee, Yankelovich witnessed and participated in what he calls 'the billion-dollar dialogue' (pp.47-57). Dialogue enabled a group of stakeholders to gain, in a single year (p.51), 'a cool billion dollars' (p. 52) for the pension's fund. The lessons learned in such a process, according to the author, went beyond the consideration of tangible benefits: '[...] in instances of dialogue between old enemies, the payoff can be far more precious than money, preventing civil war, massive suffering and death'.

It is typical of management fashion books to refer, superficially, to systematic empirical research (Kieser, 1997, pp. 50, 60). Dixon (1998) mentions the existence of 411 studies that prove the positive correlation between cooperation ('in which dialogue is critical') and productivity (pp.39-40). Accordingly, the books contain numerous examples of tangible and intangible benefits produced by dialogue in real case scenarios where teams become able to deal with 'thorny issues [...] as well as manage to exceed their aggressive goals and objectives' (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998, p. 223). All in all, as Ellinor and Gerard put it, poor communication has a high cost for organisations, a cost measured in people's frustration and millions of dollars (p. 9).

### 3. Well-known and successful users: Who is ahead of the game?

The authors use a variety of examples: many references where the name of the company is not revealed (i.e. Yankelovich, p.10), but also many well-recognised names (see Table 2 in the Appendix). In addition, their accounts include a long list of public and charitable bodies (trusts, foundations, NGOs, INGOs), as well as a number of local community projects, hospitals and universities. We have specifically shown details of for-profit companies in order to stress the process of ‘packaging’ dialogue for business settings. However, as we will see in our bibliometric study, dialogue appears as a broader managerial concept for all types of organisations, as was the case with TQM.

#### 4. Universal applicability: It’s all about communication!

A common feature of management fashion books is to identify one crucial factor as responsible for success (Kieser, 1997, p. 57). Such a factor is presented as previously neglected, opening a window of opportunity for innovation. Usually, the key factor is recognisable in any organisation (i.e. organisational culture, process reengineering, quality). In our case, communication is the factor.

The potential for dialogue is latent in any context where interpersonal communication plays a central role. It is difficult to imagine a more universal tool. The titles of the books are a clear indication of this point. Dialogue offers promising prospects, whether it is to get people to ‘think together’ (Isaacs, 1999), to ‘transform conflict into cooperation’ (Yankelovich, 1999), to ‘make talk developmental’, or to ‘rediscover the transforming power of conversation’. Indeed, the ‘magic of dialogue’ (Yankelovich, 1999; Ellinor and Gerard, 1998, p. xvii) knows few boundaries:

The dialogue process is a form of conversation that can be meaningful to people from a large number of backgrounds: from every walk of life, from every nationality, from many different professions and levels of responsibility within organisations and communities. (Isaacs, 1999, p. 10)

If we understand communication as the very fabric of our societies, dialogue’s applicability seems unlimited. Subsequently, each author outlines its potential beyond the organisational arena (Dixon to a lesser degree). For instance, Isaacs (1999) dedicates two chapters to outline the critical role of dialogue in our democracies and networking economies (pp. 322-384).

## 5. Presentation of the concept as an understandable commodity and catchy title

We have already mentioned the labels employed; let us now deal with what the name covers. Although each author acknowledges the complexity of the process and the techniques, the basic idea seems easy to grasp, for example:

[...] two purposes for doing dialogue: to strengthen personal relationships and to solve problems. (Yankelovich, 1999, p.12)

[...] think of dialogue as a communications practice that actually bridges communication, leadership, and culture. (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998, p. 13)

These simple messages put across in the first pages of the books are later fleshed out through storytelling. With the exception of Dixon's, the books contain innumerable dialogue tales. These are inspiring and easy-to-understand stories which make sense of complex situations overcome through dialogue (i.e. Yankelovich, 1999, pp. 68-70, 73-77; Ellinor and Gerard, 1998, pp.82-183, 185, 279-280, 258-259; Isaacs, 1999, pp. 21-24, 27-28, 110-115, 197-199).

Let us deal now with the packaging of dialogue as a commodity. It is generally accepted among specialists that dialogue cannot be imposed (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998, p. 225). However, it can be facilitated (i.e. Isaacs, 1999, pp. 70-202, 289-299; Yankelovich, 1999, pp. 90-109; Dixon, 1998, pp. 118-121; Ellinor and Gerard, 1998, pp. 221-231). For instance, Isaacs' consulting firm DIA-logos offers such facilitation services (1999, p. xii).

## 6. Presentation of the concept as timely, innovative and future-orientated.

None of the authors claims to be talking about an essentially new idea. They are 'rediscovering' or 'redefining' an ancient practice for a new era: 'Dialogue represents a way of working that while perhaps embedded in the genes of our ancestors is new to us' (Isaacs, 1999, p. 396). What is allegedly new is bringing dialogue to the centre of organizational life, advocating a specific form of interpersonal communication as a means of personal development, process enhancement, and performance improvement.

The timeliness of this expert intervention is linked to the diagnosis mentioned earlier on – dialogue or perish. Similarly, the innovation claims are impossible to extricate from the future-orientated promises previously outlined:

Dialogue is a powerful communication practice that transforms those who engage in it. As organizations begin to integrate it in their operations, it will revolutionize how we work in twenty-first century. (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998, p.3)

Management fashion books usually present the new concept as challenging (Kieser, 1997, p. 60). Dialogue is no exception:

Embracing dialogue can be perilous. (Isaacs, 1999, p.397)

Dare to remember what you know about the power of conversation to open new doors and heal old wounds. (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998, p.334)

[...] it is a long term solution at a time when people want immediate answers (Dixon, 1998, p.81).

Presenting a concept as a challenge reinforces the innovation claim, infusing the concept with the recurrent managerial mantras of anticipating, taking risks, and moving forward. It also might be interpreted as a recommendation of consultancy assistance, as well as a rhetorical device to differentiate dialogue from other discursive practices (i.e. discussion, debate) that do not represent a ‘countercultural process’ (Schein, 2003, p.30).

The uniqueness of dialogue practice requires a total commitment that entails transformation:

In order for organizational members to risk engaging in dialogue, the organization must have a climate that supports the development of individuals as well as the development of the organization. (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998, p. 68)

Such transformations require leadership that goes beyond the traditional top-down approach. Yankelovich (1999) terms it ‘relational leadership’ (p.13), which operates in a ‘more

consultative style' (p. 11). Managers must become dialogue 'convenors' (Isaacs, 1999, p. 291), capable of aligning the forces at play in the organisation in order to stimulate collective thinking. This appeal to a new kind of pioneering leadership is also typical of management fashion bestsellers (Kieser, 1997, p. 58), and establishes the ground from which managers will face programmatic change. Isaacs' book is a detailed blueprint for the development of the kind of future mastery that might lead groups of people to 'do something that impacts the world' (1999, p. 293).

### 7. Interpretative viability

Like a river that has no beginning and no end, there is no single clear definition of dialogue. (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998, p.19)

A conversation with a center, not sides. (Isaacs, 1999, p. 17)

When it comes to the fashion-setting process, 'communicative effectiveness should not be equated with clarity' (Giroux, 2006, p. 1229). On the contrary, the proposed concepts must leave room for interpretation in order to enable their flexible implementation on the ground. Giroux (2006)) has termed this condition 'pragmatic ambiguity'; a set of qualities – namely, ambiguity, generality and vagueness – built into the formulation of a concept in order to allow 'different courses of action while maintaining a semblance of unity' (p. 1232). Paradoxically, this practical solution, which precludes 'organisational paralysis' (p. 1254) in the application of a fashion, constitutes a key factor in the process by which it loses credibility, gets diluted, and eventually fades away (p. 1253).

According to Benders and van Veen (2001, p. 37), such conceptual ambiguity ('interpretative viability') is crucial for marketing the new fashion to a broad public. It allows many interpretations, and thus it speaks to the specific situation of different people who, in turn, can elaborate their own version of the concept. It is not only a clever rhetorical device to deal with personal and local agendas, and contingency, but also an indispensable ingredient for the success of the fashion setting process: 'The concepts sold in potential bestsellers are, therefore, both simple and clear but also ambiguous, vague, contradictory and puzzling' (Kieser, 1997, p. 59)

This rhetorical device is omnipresent in the texts analysed here. We shall offer just a few examples. In the section 'A path toward wholeness', Isaacs (1999) writes:

Any leader today might ask this question: In what ways am I helping to bring the good, the true, and the beautiful into the policies and actions for which I am responsible? One potential for genuine dialogue is to enable human beings to overcome fragmentation among these three languages and discover a means for common inquiry and understanding. In this sense, dialogue is a journey to find a new language for wholeness [...] We have genuine dialogue when all three dimensions are present; when one or more are absent, we lack it. (p. 387)

Despite offering specific techniques and detailing the skills required, our authors insist that 'the living technology of dialogue' is a craft, an art (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998, pp.57-61). This ensures interpretive viability by leaving in the hands of the followers the adaptation of dialogue formats to their particular contexts. Dialogue is itself a ubiquitous and ambiguous term (Wierzbicka, 2006). Our authors play this ambiguity to their advantage. They do so by re-naming as dialogues all sorts of conversations, whether they can cross-check or not such practices against the criteria that they have set to define their concepts of dialogue. For instance, in Isaacs (1999): Northern Ireland, South Africa and Chechnya peace talks (pp.21, 27); product development at Ford (pp.347-354); IKEA and VOLVO change processes (pp. 355-357); USA Congressional retreats (pp.374-378). When our authors repeatedly outline the beneficial outcomes of dialogue, they never explain in detail what they actually mean or how they were achieved in practice:

As dialogue is practiced over time, we discover 1) greater levels of authenticity showing up, 2) better decisions being made, and 3) improved morale and alignment forming around shared work (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998, p. 18)

Management fashion bestsellers often resort to inspirational language, intriguing imagery and mysterious evocation. As a counterbalance, they usually include a battery of scientific terminology and digested empirical research (Kieser, 1997, p. 60). Dialogue books are no exception. Indeed, the authors strive to get across the message that in spite of being considered a 'soft skill' (see Pascale, 1991), dialogue requires discipline, reflection and technique. In this respect, the books rely heavily on systems thinking, and offer interesting combinations of



lyrical and managerial phraseology. At the same time, they deploy commonsensical notions that reinforce the rhetorical device by reducing the threats to the adopter (Huczynski, 1993, p. 108). Let us take for instance a few subtitles that reflect this unique mixture in Isaacs (1999):

Three levels of action in a dialogue. [...] 1. Produce coherent actions [...] Developing capacity for new behaviour [...] 2. Create fluid structures of interaction [...] Develop predictive intuition [...] 3. Provide wholesome space for dialogue [...] (p 29-30); Jump into the void (p.170); Diagnosing structural traps (p. 204); Negotiating difference: system paradigms (p.214); Inquiry in the field and the flowering of reflective dialogue (p. 272); The ecology of thought (p.300); Transforming the inner ecology: integrating the good, the true and the beautiful (p. 310); Taking wholeness seriously (p. 385).

Finally, there is another line of ambiguity that nurtures dialogue's interpretive viability. Dialogue is presented as a mechanism to co-construct reality and, therefore, the choice of what organisational endeavours might be able to co-create gives an important margin of flexibility for the adopters.

To be clear, the rhetorical arsenal explored in this part of the paper constitutes not only a system of persuasion, but beyond that a pool of discursive resources. As Benders and van Veen (2001) suggest:

Fashion users are not simply setters and followers, but actors who use their own judgements and start from their own interests to decide how to enact fashionable rhetoric. (p. 41)

Our analysis of the rhetorical features of the four books on dialogue we have selected suggests that we can indeed talk about Dialogue as a management fashion.

### **Diffusion and the life cycle of Dialogue**

The purpose of the bibliometric analysis was twofold: to present quantitative data in addition to the textual analysis to support our contention that Dialogue has indeed become a fashion, and secondly, to be able to understand the circulation of the idea in some more detail.

We have gathered articles on dialogue (*dialogue* either in the abstract or main text of the article and a reference to Isaacs) using Scopus as our main database. As the coverage of years varies from journal to journal, we also used Emerald's database to add articles not included in Scopus, which produced an additional 19 articles. Our search was constructed in such a way as to identify articles that deal with dialogue but in its specific meaning relating to management. All in all, in the period starting with 1992, the year of Isaacs' first publication on dialogue, and finishing at the end of 2008, we have identified 145 articles that fit our criteria. The distribution of the articles across the years (see Figure 1 in the Appendix) produces a life cycle graph of the fashion suggesting it has not peaked yet.

Even given differences in approaches to compiling the basic data, comparing the frequency counts found in our study to those reported in studies of other management fashions, it would appear that Dialogue is likely to be one of the smaller fashions, more like Programme Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT) (Carson et al, 2000), than Knowledge Management, which reached 500 articles by 2000 (Raub and Ruling, 2001).

In order to add more depth to this analysis, we have also coded the use of Dialogue as either the central concept (43% of articles) or peripheral to the main interest (57% articles). Looking at the graph showing the distribution of these categories across the years (see Figure 2 in the Appendix), we can see that for most of the time Dialogue did not attract the spotlight: it was known and increasingly referred to, but 2004 was the first year when the majority of articles focus on Dialogue as the main topic.

Looking at the journals most interested in this topic and the specific sub-fields to which Dialogue may be linked, we can identify the core fashion-setting contexts. Out of 91 journals in our data, 6 (7%) are responsible for nearly 27% of articles, and 22 (24%) are responsible for publishing 53% of all the articles on Dialogue in the 14 years covered by our study. Dialogue is most strongly associated with organizational change and learning, judging by the journal titles (see Table 3 in the Appendix). This conclusion is confirmed also by a different finding, tracking the context in which Dialogue appeared: 39 articles (27%) were concerned with the concept of the Learning Organization.

### **Dialogue fashion-setters**

Fashion setters are far from being autonomous agents. Their activity is subjected to a number of factors in the market for their services (Wright and Kwon, 2006, p. 370). However, their crucial role in the fashion-setting process remains undisputed (Mills et al., 2009, p.36). This section outlines some characteristic of the supply-side of the dialogue fashion. Three key actors are taken into consideration: the business school, the guru, and the consultants.

Business schools have traditionally played an important role in organisational change. The urgency of keeping up with the pace of change in the business environment (Mills et al., 2009, p. 35) leads them to provide legitimacy to new concepts and emergent actors (Kieser, 1997, p. 60), or to react critically providing alternative discourses (Clark, 2004, p. 298).

Communication scholars have pointed out that the managerial versions of dialogue stem from the work of physicist David Bohm (Shaw, 2002; Cissna and Anderson, 2002; Deetz and Simpson, 2004; Barge and Little, 2002). The Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has played a central role in fostering the development of Bohm's legacy in organisational theory (Cissna and Anderson, 2002, pp. 230).

Spell (1999) has argued that sometimes fashions may emerge out of literature connected with a particular sub-field of management. This hypothesis seems appropriate in our case. Dialogue was central to another fashion, Learning Organization, put on the map by Peter Senge's bestselling *The Fifth Discipline* (1993, pp.233-269). However, a richer formulation of dialogue soon emerged, giving birth to MIT's Dialogue Project (Cissna and Anderson, 2002, pp. 13, 231). Its founder, Dr. William Isaacs, a disciple of both Bohm and Senge, has been recognised since as a key academic author, consultant, and trainer within the corporate arena (Pearce and Pearce, 2004). Isaacs has been depicted by Yankelovich (1999) as a 'management guru' who discovered 'the distinctive contribution that dialogue makes to the success of business teams' (p. 23).

Isaacs presents his own credentials on the website of Dialogos, his consultancy firm, in the following way:

His 1999 book [...] has been translated into seven languages [...]. In 1990 Dr. Isaacs co-founded (with Peter Senge) the Center for Organizational Learning at MIT, a consortium of 25 leading companies dedicated to cross -organizational learning and change. He received a major grant from the Kellogg Foundation to

found and run the MIT Dialogue Project, which initiated [...] experiments around the world over the past ten years. For the past 20 years he has consulted to senior leaders of prominent organizations [...] recent clients include British Petroleum, the International Finance Corporation [...] the World Bank Group, Royal Bank of Scotland, NASA, Shell, Motorola...  
([www.dialogos.com/about/team/isaacs.html](http://www.dialogos.com/about/team/isaacs.html))

This fits in with the importance for management gurus of keeping in close proximity to successful business leaders (Kieser 1997, p. 61) but also, more broadly, to people in successful businesses. The idea is crystallised in Isaacs' book:

I am no longer concerned, as I once was, that readers will find this material impractical [...] The people with whom these projects were carried out were practical people, line managers, executives, and staff mostly coming from Fortune 100 companies (P. Senge 'Foreword' in Isaacs, 1999, p.xix)

Such statements seem crucial in constructing credibility, thus helping to produce a bestseller and, in turn, helping the fashions to spread. Another aspect of the usefulness of such proximity has also been noted: before new management ideas are disseminated, they have already undergone a research-marketing process:

Gurus, in this instance, selected their ideas on the basis of observation of management practice. These were then refined in collaboration with managers. Book editors selected potential best-selling authors and then worked closely with them in order to turn their ideas into products that were likely to be successful with the intended audience. (Clark, 2004, p. 302)

Isaacs' research at the Dialogue Project combined academic, consultancy and training work. This formula had already proven successful, for example in the case of his mentor Peter Senge (1993). Isaacs' book can thus be seen as only one of the means of popularising his ideas and gaining credibility in addition to conference circuits and training and development programmes that contribute to the snowballing process of fashion-setting (Clark, 2004, p. 303). According to Abrahamson (1996), training appeals to managers, as they strive to appear at the forefront of the latest management trend, and to consultants, because it allows them to

build and, at the same time, to benefit from new techniques. In doing so, the consumers become fashion-setters themselves (Wright and Kwon, 2006).

The popularity of such training programs can be striking. For instance, Senge mentions that over four thousand managers undertook his courses at MIT (1999, p.16). This activity plays a significant part in the initial stages of the fashion-setting process. On the one hand, it spreads the word among a specialised public, who in turn may become a substantial pool of clients. On the other hand, it functions as a sounding board for the new ideas. Along the way, academic-consultants such as Isaacs become well known innovation brokers, 'located at the centre of a web of cooperative relationships that are essential to the final outcome' (Clark, 2004, p.3002).

Although MIT's Dialogue Project has not been the only source of managerial versions of dialogue, it seems to have been the epicentre of the fashion. For instance, Ellinor and Gerard's Dialogue Group has been characterised as 'the 'West Coast variation of MIT's "East Coast" version of doing dialogue' (Pearce and Pearce, 2000, p. 167). Such influence is clearly acknowledged by Ellinor and Gerard (1998) throughout their book (i.e. pp. 27, 158, 221). The exploratory research we conducted prior to our bibliometric study indicated that Isaacs' interpretation of dialogue appears to have had by far the widest international presence in management print media (This led us to use his name as one of the search criteria).

To sum up, our analysis shows that knowledge creating processes have to be seen as collaborative and that innovation is an outcome of such processes rather than its stimulus.

### **Dialogue in context**

Despite a number of comparative studies discussed earlier, fashions have been predominantly studied as discrete and unconnected phenomena. In this section, we will consider both the interconnectedness of management fashions and the role of the wider socio-political environment in the development of fashions, in other words, the connection of fashions to ideas and trends outside the immediate organizational environment. We argue that fashions should be understood at two levels of analysis: in relation to previous fashions (diachronically); and in relation to one another (synchronically). The first can be approached using the idea of 'sediment', discussed in the first section of the paper; the second will be explored using the idea of 'normative viability' introduced later in this section.

## Dialogue and sedimentation

The distinction between people-orientated, and process or production-focussed techniques, is classic in management thought (Human Relations vs. Scientific Management; see Wren, 1993) as well as in the study of fashions (Carson et al., 2000). Dialogue belongs to the first category, traditionally characterised as the 'soft' dimension of an organisation (Pascale, 1991; p. 40). The leading fashions in the last decades have, however, been predominantly process-orientated, for example TQM, Balance Score Card, Business Process Reengineering (Mills et al. 2009). Thus Dialogue as a people-oriented fashion offers to redress the balance and deal with the human relations of organisational life, complementing other programs and amending the failures of the 'hard' fashions. Isaacs (1999) makes this unique selling point clear:

Reengineering started out as an ideal solution to a modern business problem: how to link technological and computer-based shifts in the ways people worked with the insights of the Total Quality Movement [...] Despite growing to a \$51 billion industry, the reengineering movement 'ignored people,' [...] Reengineering created fear and was resisted. Few people wanted to 'be reengineered' or to work in a reengineered organization. (pp.186-7)

Cissna and Anderson (2002) have written that dialogue can fulfil a function of 'basic communication maintenance' (p. 239). Current participatory trends demand such maintenance. For instance, the potential for the democratization of organisational life has become the object of substantial research, although the challenge of putting these ideals into practice seems as yet insurmountable in large scale organisations (see Heller et al., 1998). Communication has been at the heart of the matter, '[u]ltimately, it is through communication practices that participation is put into practice, maintained and evaluated' (Cheney et al., 2004, p. 238).

Similar challenges were faced by previous fashions: for instance, Dialogue books advocate a participatory ethos that can be traced to other labels such as Workplace Democracy, Quality Circles, Quality of Working Life or Self-directed Work Teams (Cheney et al., 2004, p.239). Dialogue also supports employee involvement in organisational goal achievement, a tenet postulated by the Learning Organisation (Mills

et al., 2009, p.75); and like Total Quality Management it supports the shift from mass production to an emphasis on people and teamwork (Mills et al., 2009, p.92). Pascale (1991) mentioned the ‘magic’ of dialogue in Honda (pp. 25-6) and the benefits of collective intelligence in Japanese businesses (p. 27) decades ago.

Dialogue can thus be convincingly seen as built on the sediments left by previous fashions, or as an elaboration of ideas that have been in circulation before.

### Normative viability of Dialogue

The study of management fashions has so far underplayed the role of the wider socio-political environment. Despite Abramson’s consideration of ‘norms of rationality’ as one of the reasons for changing fashions, not many studies have attempted explanations of such a broad nature. In their study, Carson et al. (2000) attempted to correlate fashion types with economic variables. Although the findings were inconclusive in this respect (p.1154), they have served to point out new directions for the investigation of management fashions’ broader context.

In previous sections we relied on a number of well established ways of analysing a management fashion, here we introduce Kieser’s ideas of timeliness: ‘to turn into a management fashion a concept must become an object of public discourse’ (quoted in Giroux, 2006, p.1236). Management fashion scholars have started to pay attention to the impact of the broader socio-political context in organisational change (i.e. Nijholt and Benders, 2007). This interest has been labelled by Giroux (2006) as ‘normative viability’:

In the case of Quality Movement, the rise in popularity was supported by political, historical, and socio-economic circumstances precipitating the selection of quality as a unifying theme [...] This was facilitated by the *normative viability* (Ortmann, 1995) of quality, i.e. the already positive associations of the word *quality* which contributed to its viability as a legitimate concern, and eventually as a legitimization device. (p. 1251; italics in the original)

In the case of our study, the normative viability of Dialogue is derived from the current macro-political context. Dialogue has been part of public and political discourse since the early days of the Cold War (Wierzbicka, 2006). However, as Linder (2001) has argued, recent decades

have seen a revival of the concept in the public sphere. This revival is part of the ‘communicative and deliberative turn’ (Fischer, 2003, p.222) taken by the social and political sciences. It also comes as a consequence of the shift from government to governance in public policy (Fischer, 2006):

Emerging [...] to deal with the traditional state’s inability to cope with a range of contemporary social problems [...] the concept of governance has evolved to identify and explain new modes of problem solving and decision making [...] Governance, given its emphasis on decentered citizen engagement, is touted for being a much more flexible and democratic way to deal with public problems.  
(p. 19)

Therefore, the dialogic turn seems rooted in challenges faced by our societies, as well as in different responses articulated to deal with them.

The parallel evolution of organisational practice and public discourse raises interesting questions about how trends from the wider socio-political context permeate managerial discourse and vice versa. The notion of ‘corporate citizenship’(see Parker, 2002, pp. 60-63) is a good example. Dialogue, in its organisational version, offers a lifestyle and a set of principles for the corporate citizen. The idea of ‘greening’ organizations is an even more interesting example of how business and non-business discourses interpenetrate. Fineman (2001), while cautioning about identifying ‘greening’ as a management fashion, is very outspoken about lessons that organizational scholars can learn from the adoption of this particular discourse by organizations: ‘greening encapsulates the way management knowledge is shaped by rhetorical, social, emotional and political features’ (p.19). Although environmental discourses and green ideas are by no means new (Dobson, 1990), they have been translated into a managerial technique (and discourse) over the last two decades, precisely because their time has come.

While the timeliness, or the normative viability, connects different spheres of social life, it also seems to expose them to shared dangers. The dialogic turn in the public sphere is far from referring to an undisputed set of practices. Public dialogue as citizen participation and public engagement has raised concerns regarding the use of the term to frame processes of ‘manipulation’ and ‘placation’ (Roper et al., 2004, p. 12). In



organization contexts, ‘theories of dialogue may be one of the greatest threats to productive dialogic encounters’ because of their focus on organisational alignment that neglects difference (Deetz and Simpson, 2004, p. 152). The problem is, partly, a matter of expectations. Research has shown how the word dialogue evokes strong hope for change which is rarely fulfilled in reality. Much of the cynicism surrounding dialogue stems also from this pervasive abuse of the concept (see Wierzbicka, 2006). In the case of Dialogue as a management fashion, as we have shown, stretching the concept is a necessary rhetorical device for its success. Paradoxically, Dialogue’s normative viability in the current socio-political context might be weakened in the fashion-setting process. The ‘loose coupling between concepts’ labels and contents’ that is typical of the late stages of a management fashion life cycle (Benders and Van Veen, 2001, p. 49) might contribute to encouraging cynicism about the concept in the public sphere.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has shown that Dialogue can be treated as a management fashion. Although not as popular as some other such fashions, judging by the indirect criterion of the number of journal articles it inspired, Dialogue is still growing. We have also shown that this fashion, like others, has been fuelled by the efforts of fashion setters like William Isaacs. Analysing his involvement in this fashion-setting process leads us to conclude that looking for origins of management fashions *either* in theory *or* in practice is perhaps no longer a valid approach given the careful blending by gurus of academic credentials, theoretical insights and lessons-learned from audiences, for getting a sense of the marketing potential they can exploit for the selling of such fashions. Fashions as management innovation are created at the boundary between the worlds of managerial theory and practice. The question about the relationship between institutionalised, textbook knowledge, and fashions as emerging, possibly transitory knowledge which we identified in the literature, has been also been tackled in the paper. We took the view that to fully understand a fashion, one needs to place it in a meaningful context, both in terms of other fashions operating at the same time, and the historical context of fashions and practices that have already had their day. Fashions are constructed as part of a tradition. They continue but simultaneously rework an identifiable set of ideas and practices. At the same time, they operate by finding a space in the existing market. But given the need for a big rhetorical gesture, it seems reasonable to expect that any new fashion will position itself in radical opposition to those established in the market. While a fashion may be subject

to processes of institutionalisation, it also relies heavily on common sense categories. In this way fashions may not be as transitory as some of the peaked bell curves of their life cycles might suggest. Nor are they constrained by the corporate, managerial, academic and consultancy nexus which first nurtures, hosts and then promotes them. They can go out into the wider public sphere, acquire and bring home ideas and fashions from other social, artistic and political movements – environmentalism, citizenship, consumer activism – and rework them into new managerial fashions. Dialogue is merely the latest such example of this continual process in the propagation and mutation of ideas.

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## Appendix

Table 1: Seven forces converge to intensify the need for dialogue in business settings. Source: Adapted from Yankelovich (1999, p.13)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Erosion of authority and hierarchy in the workplace in favour of flatter organizations.</li> <li>• The trend toward forming strategic alliances with organizations that bring different corporate cultures, traditions, structures, and even languages to the new partnerships. Without dialogue, misunderstandings arise almost immediately.</li> <li>• The need to repair the damage to morale that results from downsizing. Employers who have recently downsized or reengineered their companies confront a mistrusting and resentful workforce precisely when, to remain competitive, they need highly motivated workers.</li> <li>• The need to stimulate the maximum amount of creativity, innovation, and initiative in co-workers.</li> <li>• The need to align the entire organization in implementing shared visions and strategies.</li> <li>• The growing demand by employees for quality-of-life benefits.</li> <li>• The growing importance of developing a strong customer focus, which requires a better understanding of one's customers.</li> </ul>
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Table 2: Examples of successful users of Dialogue.

Authors	Companies cited for their approach to Dialogue
Isaacs (1999)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ford (p.20,45-6,213, 347-354,358-9)</li> <li>• Hewlett-Packard (p.20)</li> <li>• Shell (p.20, p.326,342-7)</li> <li>• Amoco (p.20)</li> <li>• Motorola (p.20)</li> </ul>

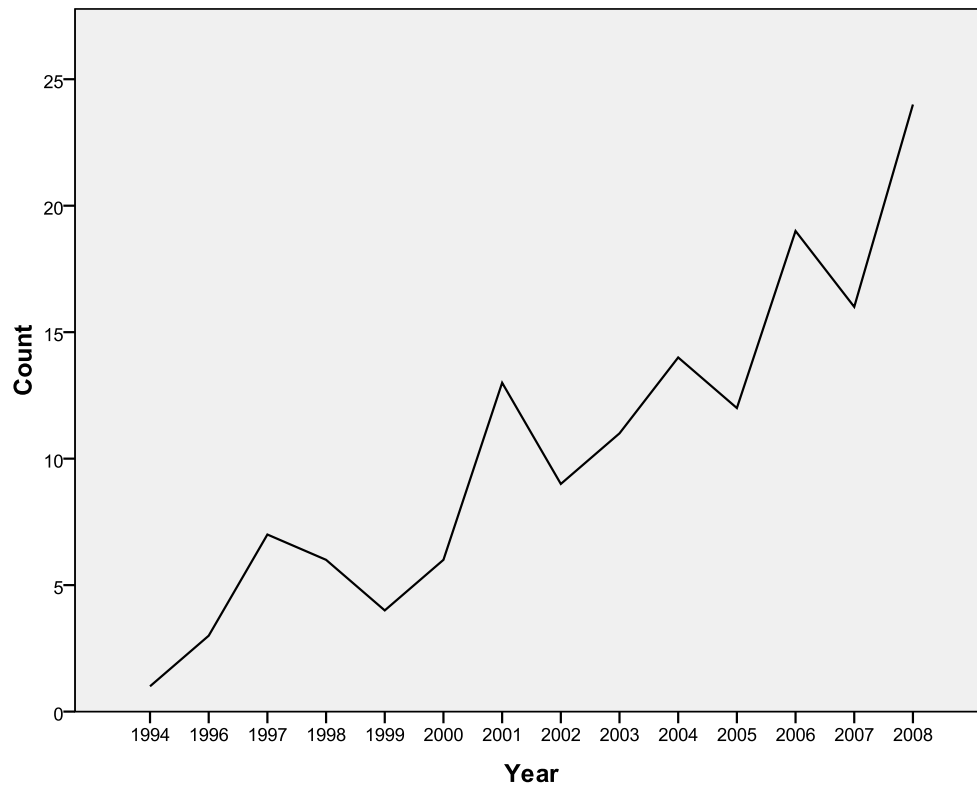
Yankelovich (1999)	• ATandT (p.20)
	• Lucent (p.20)
	• IKEA (p.355-7,359)
	• VOLVO (p.355-7)
	• US West (p.27)
Ellinor and Gerard (1998)	• DataQuest (93-96,109)
	• Polish-American Bank (p.192-3)
	• Levi Strauss and Co. (p.234)
	• Digital Equipment Corporation (p.234)
	• GS Technologies (p.235)
Dixon (1998)	• Hewlett Packard (p.235-6)
	• 3-Com Corporation (p.236)
	• Arthur Andersen and Co. (p.283)
	• Lovelace Health Systems, Inc. (p.238)
	• Steelcase Corporation (p. 103-104)
	• Hitachi America Ltd. (p. 104)
	• National City Bank (p. 104)
	• Owens Corning (p. 104)
	• SAS Airlines (p. 104)
	• Haworth (p. 104-105)
	• Siemens (p. 105)

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Journal of Organizational Change Management	13	9.0	9.0
Communication Theory	6	4.1	13.1
The Learning Organization	6	4.1	17.2
Journal of Management Development	5	3.4	20.7
Management Learning	5	3.4	24.1
Academy of Management Learning & Education	4	2.8	26.9

Table 3: Top journals on Dialogue, 1994-2008 in terms of number of articles



Figure 1: Life cycle of Dialogue.



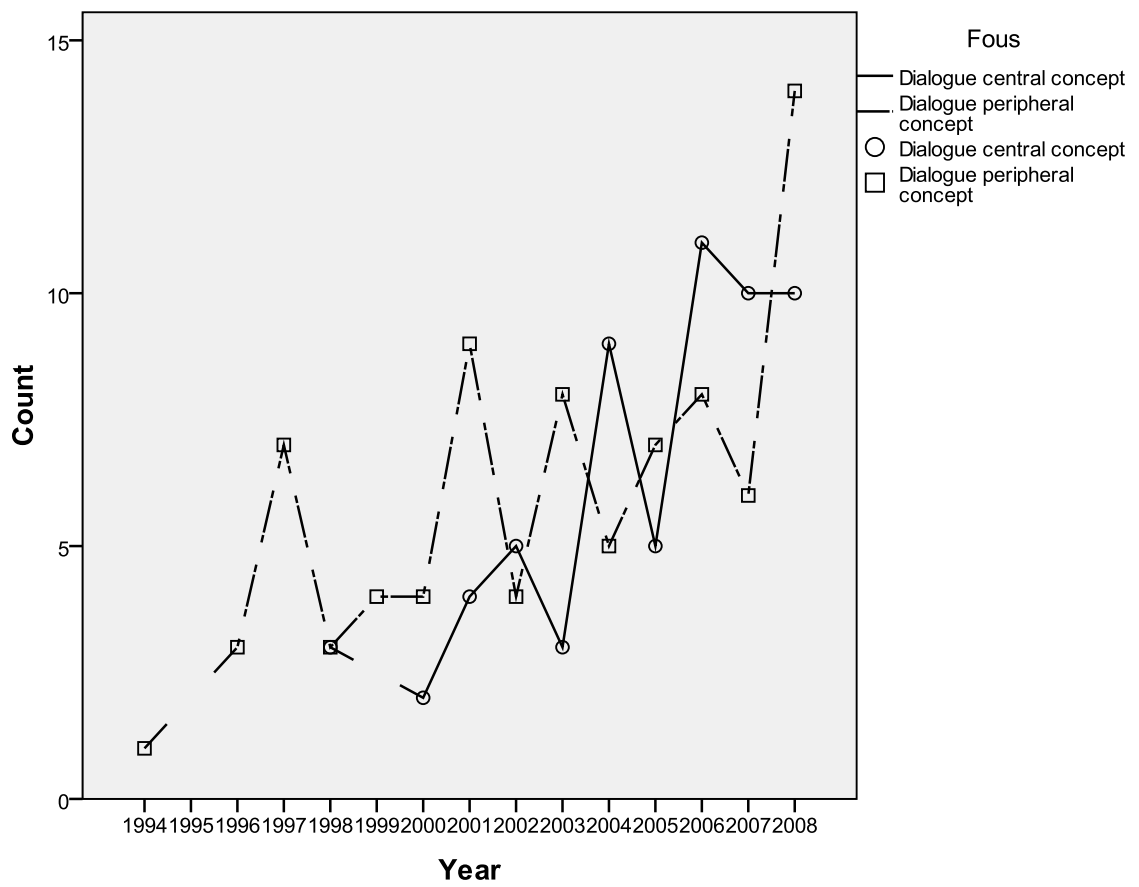


Figure 2: Dialogue as central or peripheral interest.